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ABSTRACT

A foreign language teaching approach that develops communicative competence is described. Strategic interaction promotes a sense of community among students while involving both the individual learner and the teacher. The main organizational device of strategic interaction is the scenario, in which the teacher proposes a theme that challenges students to communicate and to invest their egos in the interaction. Students work in small groups to fulfill the communicative task, with each student having the option to serve as a group spokesperson or to contribute to the task in a less public way. More ego involvement is possible because the student has a genuine choice as to the level of participation. Guidelines for the selection of themes from the media and from personal experience are offered along with examples of role playing scenarios. It is concluded that language used for genuinely communicative purposes is the language best learned. (RW)

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The Concept of Personal Involvement in Foreign Language Study

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Let me begin with a few remarks on how we practitioners of the instructional arts tend to view the object of our profession--language. Over the recent past, psycholinguists and sociolinguists have added considerably to our awareness of what should be incorporated into a definition of language. The greatest influence on the definition probably has come from Noam Chomsky who made popular the current rule-oriented view of language. While traditional grammar-trained teachers always thought of language as having rules, it was Chomsky who advanced the idea that every human language had a finite number of them. The next step was an obvious one--at least for the foreign language teacher: my students will know the language I am teaching them once they learn all the rules associated with it.

Those theoreticians who denied Chomsky did not do so because they disagreed with the notion of "rule." Rather, they opposed the limitations of language seen as "formal" or grammatical rules. Research over the last decade in all of the language sciences has resulted in more rules to reflect social constraints (such as when to say "tu" and "usted" in Spanish), conversational management (i.e., how to take turns in dialogs, as well as to engage in self-repair), and a wide range of rhetorical devices--called functions--which enable the learner to argue, agree, interrupt and change the subject. Then along came Krashen and we began to distinguish between what rules are consciously learned and which ones acquired unconsciously.

The interest among applied linguists in how people learn languages rather than in how languages are constituted actually represents a major shift of emphasis from the artifact to be learned to the subjects learning it. Jim Cummins, in Canada, has given formal definition to something teachers have intuitively felt about the activity of language instruction and the reaction of students to it. According to Cummins, there is a basic interpersonal communicative skill--abbreviated BICS--which is activated when learners are placed in a real situation of speaking the language. Opposed to BICS is CALP, the so-called "cognitive academic linguistic proficiency." CALP dominates in the formal classroom, where students react to the materials

presented to them. As teachers we recognize and reward the good performers on classroom tests and exercises. Once placed in the field, others of our students sometimes turn out to be far more communicative than our model classroom performers. This is a reality we have not been so quick to accept. Yet, we must accept it if we are to make progress in the art of foreign language teaching.

We stand at the beginning of the 80th. decade of the 20th. century with a modicum of advancement in our methodology but with a number of aphoristic theorems which we have phrased about common-sense truths in the field: (1) Language is rule-bound but the rules affect much more than formal, grammatical elements. There are rules of society, culture, and conversational management which must be acquired as well. (2) Successful learners of foreign languages are not of one type. There are as many learning styles as there are personality types. (3) Some of the psychological factors which affect the learning of a new language are under the control of the learner while others appear to follow some kind of natural acquisitional order. (4) Some people learn languages better by talking with natives while others seem to excel in the classroom. To the above we can add one more vital element--the individual teacher. Despite claims of many teachers that they follow a given method, we know that no two teachers are exactly alike. Some of us can be very dramatic and promote learning by the sheer strength of our histrionic technique. Others of us prefer not to be so dominant in the classroom. Members of this second group tend naturally to favor community-oriented approaches.

Ideally, we should seek a method of instruction which promotes a community-sense among our students and yet addresses both the individual learner and teacher. The method begun recently at the University of Delaware may be the ideal for group and individual needs. Called "strategic interaction" or "SI", this method has as its main organizational device the scenario. In the scenario, students have the option to respond to a challenge of communication in their own ways. The teacher proposes a theme and the students are given the freedom to invest their "egos" in interaction to whatever extent they please. In this way, the attention of the student is taken away from language as an artifact to be mastered and shifted to a communicative goal to be reached. The teacher is redefined in the process as a "guide", "consultant", and "coach"

rather than as a figure of power to be placated. The following is an illustration of a scenario theme which can be assigned to the students:

> You are an American student attending a university in Italy. You receive two invitations for the same evening. One is from a professor who has asked you to dinner and wishes to discuss a research project you are eager to undertake. This professor is not an easy person to become familiar with and such an invitation is truly exceptional. The other invitation is from a student organization which offers considerable discounts for living expenses in their modern apartments. You do not have much money and you need to find less expensive quarters. This invitation will be the only one that the student organization will give out for the year. If you don't go, you may not be put on the favored list for an apartment.

Faced with this situation, the student is free to decide with whom he or she would like to interact. What strategies will be chosen? Is there a way to have the best of both offers? One student may decide simply to enter into a brief dialog with either the professor or the representative of the student organization. Another might construct a rather elaborate verbal strategy and enter into extended discourse with both.

To soften the tension provoked by the need to decide, diverse groups of students are assigned the role to fulfill. Working together, they come to some sort of decision of what to do. Thanks to the natural dynamics of groups, one student will emerge as the most likely to do the talking. The others help, in their own ways. Perhaps two or more students will volunteer to play out the role. They can each be given a chance. Meanwhile, the quiet and withdrawn student is free to contribute to the work of the group without having to serve as the spokesman. One point we teachers have yet to incorporate into our methodologies is the fact that students can be excellent learners of a new language without wishing to perform before the entire class. The shelter of the group enables such students to participate without undue stress.

The involvement of the "ego" can only take place if there is freedom of choice. In the traditional kind of role-play that is well-known to the teaching profession, there is no real choice open to the student. Compare

the lack of options in the following sample role-play with the possibilities of interaction that were present in the scenario cited above:

> You are an American student in Italy. Your professor has invited you to have dinner with him. Refuse the invitation as politely as you can.

The student-player, even if willing, can gain very little from such a role-play beyond practicing some social protocols and grammatical constructions, i.e., engaging in what we could call "learning-enhancement activities." Scenarios with the greatest potential for ego-involvement are those which permit diverse roles to be played by different students. The following scenario has an interaction between two persons who have different stakes in the outcome of the communication:

> Role no. 1: You are a traveller about to go through customs in order to enter the country of your destination. The rules permit a limited amount of currency to be carried on one's person. You have more than the limit. The person in front of you has just been arrested for having too much currency and has been taken away. What will you say to the customs officer? Will you tell the truth or try to get through?
>
> Role no. 2: You are a customs agent. You have just caught a traveller who was trying to enter your country with too much currency. This is part of your job, but as the result of the arrest, an enormous jam of travellers has piled up at your station. Many of these travellers have to make other travel connections. What will you do with the remaining passengers? Will you be as thorough with them as you were with this passenger?

These roles are written on separate cards and given to separate groups of students. Neither group knows what is written on the other card. After some rehearsal during which the reactions of the other party are anticipated, spokesmen for the two groups are given a chance to interact. Such situations occur frequently in real life. When they do, the communicants have to listen closely to what the other person says before initiating a personal strategy of discourse. There is a potential interactional ambiguity whereby neither party can determine exactly what sort of role is being played by the other. Is the traveller an honest person? What about the customs agent? Will he

(or she) pick up some clues to suspect the traveller of dishonesty, or simply decide to let the traveller pass through? We are always telling our students to be good listeners. Here is a natural way to force them to attend to what others are saying in the target language.

How does the teacher find likely scenario themes that will assure the type of ego-involvement we are discussing? There are several places where good themes are often located. One of them is the daily newspaper. Look for the section which gives the news about personalities. A favorite ploy of mine is to take a letter from the advice-to-the-lovelorn column, such as "Dear Abby." I pick a letter, read it to the class, but do not give the answer supplied by the advisor. The class must work out an an answer themselves and even create a dialog between the letter-writer and either Abby or the person mentioned as the source of the problem--a mother-in-law, a lover, etc. Another source of themes is literature. Most novels and short-stories have plots which involve decision-making of some kind. If you are a teacher of French, you can use such writers as Guy de Maupassant. Take one of his plots and stop short of the resolution. Before allowing the students to read the ending, have them create scenarios which contain their own resolutions.

The best themes for scenarios come from real life. If we are to seek "ego-involvement" with our language, thereby fostering acquisition, then the bridge between the methodology and the students' personal experiences must be built. As a teacher, I remain acutely aware of how my subject matter relates to my life outside the classroom. Things happen to me and prompt me to contemplate how they would have been carried off in the language I am teaching. I wonder how many of my readers have shared the experience with me of finding that the airline has overbooked a flight? What counter-arguments have you used against the entreaties of the ticket clerk who wants you to take another plane? How many times have you arrived at a hotel to find that there is no record of the reservation you made several weeks in advance? What do you say to the waiter who has just served you a dish of luke-warm, insipid clam chowder? These are not experiences that come only with residence in a foreign country. They happen to all of us from time to time in our daily lives and they cause us to draw upon our native verbal skills to a considerable degree.

Among personal experience themes, the very best are those of the students, themselves. Once the notion of scenario is well-entrenched in the classroom, students should be allowed to prepare their own. Given this chance to relate their experiences to the learning of a new language, students develop a feeling of control which is not possible with role-plays or memorized dialogs. As in psycho-drama, the acting out of personal life-episodes, even in abstract form, can be uplifting. Sometimes, these personal themes are pure fantasy--such as what would happen if I were a passenger on a plane that is being hijacked? Or, what would I say if I were caught in a public place without the proper clothing? We have already begun to gather experimental evidence that points to greater control of the target language by students who are given the opportunity to discuss topics meaningful to them. Lantolf and Khanji (1982) report on the language use of a student who was allowed to switch from discussing a picture (as in the bilingual syntax measurement test) to talking about religion, a matter of much greater interest to him. The shift in topic from one which was clearly artifactual to one which was, for all intents, a "real" interest resulted in a marked change in verbal behavior. The change included the use of embedded clauses, an expanded vocabulary, and a more concerted effort to employ non-verbals to support conversation. The lesson we foreign-language teachers must take from such evidence is that language used for genuinely communicative purposes--with the full range of human involvement--is language best learned. It is artificial to concentrate on <u>how</u> one is speaking rather than on <u>what</u> one is saying. Unfortunately, most of the experimental research done on second-language acquisition over the last decade has focussed on error-making and therefore on how one is speaking. We have yet to evolve an approach which assesses how well students perform various roles in the target language. At the very least, we should recognize that students are called upon to have two distinct kinds of interaction in the classroom: (1) scenario-bound interactions, in which true communication in the target language is simulated and (2) the performance of pedagogical roles, that is, interactional frames which serve the function of conscious teaching and learning. In the SI approach, target language use begins within the scenario. If the course of instruction is proceeding successfully, the target language gradually assumes the pedagogical function as well. What greater sense of satisfaction could be had than to terminate the course of instruction with students not only able to create dialogs in the target language but also to use it in discussing what they are learning?

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For further information about SI, the reader may consult the following articles. A full, book-length presentation of the SI method is underway.

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